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Tuesday Beijing Urges 'Prompt Measures' By US to Keep Elon Musk's Satellites Away From Space Station

By - Morgan Artyukhina

After two separate near-collision incidents earlier this year, the Chinese government has asked Washington to take action to protect its space station and taikonauts from the myriad satellites put into orbit by US defense contractor SpaceX.

"I can confirm that Starlink satellites launched by SpaceX of the US had [two close encounters](#) with the China Space Station in July and October this year respectively when Chinese astronauts were working there. For safety considerations, the China Space Station implemented preventive collision avoidance control," Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told [reporters on Tuesday](#).

China's new space station, Tiangong (Sky Palace), was put into orbit earlier this year and orbits at an altitude of between 210 and 280 miles above the Earth. Three Chinese taikonauts [blasted off from Jiuquan](#) in October for a six-month stay on the station, which will be much smaller than the International Space Station (ISS) but will be roughly equivalent in size to Russia's retired space station, Mir, when fully assembled.

Zhao noted some of the obligations all space-faring nations hold under the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, such as regarding all astronauts as "envoys of mankind" rather than representatives of a particular nation or people, and of the responsibility to inform other treaty signatories or the United Nations of potential dangers to astronauts in space. He also noted that nations "bear international responsibility for national activities in outer space" conducted by their private companies.

"The US claims to be a strong advocate for the concept of 'responsible behavior in outer space,' but it disregarded its Treaty obligations and posed a grave threat to the safety of astronauts," Zhao added. "This is a typical double standard."

"Exploration and peaceful uses of outer space is a common cause of all humanity. Guided by the vision of advancing the welfare of all, China is committed to peaceful uses of space. The US should respect international order in space based on international law, take prompt measures to prevent such incidents from recurring, and act responsibly to safeguard the safety of in-orbit astronauts and the safe and steady operation of space facilities," the spokesperson added. Neither Washington or SpaceX have responded to news about China's letter to the UN or Zhao's Tuesday comments.

Starlink is a constellation of hundreds of low Earth orbit satellites used by SpaceX to provide [broadband internet service](#) for its customers. SpaceX has already put more than 1,600 Starlink satellites into orbit, but has already filed paperwork to launch as many as 42,000, [according to Space.com](#).

For context, there were just 7,200 manmade satellites in total orbiting Earth as of September, [according to UN figures](#). According to a [space junk tracker](#) operated by the US space agency NASA, there are some 27,000 pieces of manmade debris caught in orbit, as well.

SpaceX's grandiose plans for Starlink have been criticized from a number of perspectives, including the danger posed to people and other objects in orbit by there being more objects in orbit, but also for astronomers, who [complained to the UN](#) in August that the zippy satellites are obscuring their views of deep space.

"The rising population of space debris increases the potential danger to all space vehicles, including to the International Space Station and other spacecraft with humans aboard, such as SpaceX's Crew Dragon," NASA says on its website. The Crew Dragon is the only way for US astronauts to get to the ISS since the Space Shuttle was retired in 2011 and until Boeing's Starliner and the Orion spacecraft become useful in 2022.

"The worst thing in the world is to have a collision," SpaceX President and CEO Gwynne [Shotwell told Space.com](#) in September, adding that the company's satellites have autonomous collision avoidance technology.

Of course, so do self-driving cars made by Tesla, another company owned by SpaceX founder Elon Musk, and they have a worrisome habit of [driving into things](#) at full speed.

Ironically, in March, SpaceX signed an [agreement with NASA](#) to steer its satellites away from the ISS if they would come within 3 miles of each other.

Jonathan McDowell of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for [Astrophysics told AFP](#) that astronomers have "really noticed the increase in the number of close passes since Starlink started getting deployed," adding that any collision would likely "completely demolish" the Chinese space station.

In November, Russia tested an [anti-satellite \(ASAT\) missile](#) on one of its own derelict satellites over the Arctic Ocean. The ASAT test was [carefully executed](#) to minimize danger to the ISS, which orbits in a different direction and different altitude than the Tselina-D satellite that was destroyed. However, the US derided the test as "reckless" and "destructive," claiming the debris "now threaten the interests of all nations."

After the test, the four astronauts on the ISS, one of whom was Russian, sheltered for a period of time in their departure space capsules in case of a potential impact, but the debris never posed an active threat to the space station or the people inside it.

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US State Dept. Threatens Intervention in Somalia After Farmaajo Fires PM Roble Ahead of Elections

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The US has issued a startling threat to Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known as Farmaajo, after he attempted to remove from office Prime Minister Mohamed Roble, who is overseeing the country's lengthy elections process.

"The US is prepared to act against those who obstruct Somalia's path to peace," the US State Department's Bureau of African Affairs said on its Twitter account on Tuesday.

The statement called Roble's attempted suspension "alarming" and added that "we support his efforts for rapid & credible elections. All parties must desist from escalatory actions & statements."

The bureau's post quote-tweeted a message from the US embassy in Mogadishu the day prior calling for de-escalation of tensions by all parties and for the National Consultative Council to meet immediately and "accelerate and improve the electoral process and bring the elections to a rapid, credible conclusion."

Somalia's [monthslong elections process](#) was due to conclude on December 24, the final day for electors to cast their ballots for representatives to the House of the People, the country's lower chamber of parliament. Once the new lawmakers take office, indirect selection of Farmaajo's replacement can begin.

Farmaajo faces a [host of challengers](#) in the election, including several former presidents and premiers, but Roble isn't one of them.

Roble was assigned control over the process in May after an attempt by Farmaajo to [extend his mandate](#) by two years to settle disputes over the election process nearly spun the country into a new civil war. However, on Monday Farmaajo announced he was suspending Roble from office, claiming he was "linked with corruption."

Farmaajo accused Roble of interfering in a probe into accusations [Roble had stolen](#) a piece of coastal property that belonged to the Somali Army by shuffling the Justice and Defense ministry portfolios and ordering the suspension of the Somali Coast Guard commander, Gen. Abdihamid Mohamed Dirir, the officer who brought the accusations against him.

In turn, [Roble accused Farmaajo](#) of seemingly deciding to "destroy government institutions" and ordered "all Somali national forces to work under the command of the office of the prime minister from today."

It was the second time this year that Farmaajo attempted to clip Roble's wings, with the first [coming in September](#) after Roble visited Nairobi in August and later fired the country's spy chief, which Farmaajo said he had no power to do. However, the two issued a [joint statement](#) in late October resolving the dispute.

Farmaajo has long been a partner to the US in the region, working closely with US Africa Command (USAFRICOM) to fight al-Shabaab, a terrorist group aligned with al-Qaeda* and to advance US and UK [oil interests](#) in the region, which were put on hold for years by civil war. When Roble defied Farmaajo's Senate-backed term extension in April and parts of the army splintered and sided with the premier, [the US threatened](#) "all available tools, including sanctions and visa restrictions" against "efforts to undermine peace and stability in Somalia."

To some observers, this back and forth by the US has been indicative of how Washington seeks to keep the country, and the larger Horn of Africa region, off balance.

"1st, they pit one Somali politician against the other. 2nd, they issue statements urging the parties to de-escalate. 3rd, they give airtime to their minion(s). 4th, they malign the reputation of the country. 5th, they tighten their noose & show why they're needed in #Somalia," tweeted Fadumo Qasim Dayib, a Somali politician who was the country's first woman to seek the presidency in 2016.

Farmaajo took office in 2017 after winning that election, the country's first democratic vote since 1967, although widespread allegations of corruption nonetheless persisted. He had previously spent about six months as Somalia's prime minister in 2010 and 2011. Despite his administration's closeness with Washington, Farmaajo also bucked a major trend by [signing a Joint Declaration](#) on Comprehensive Cooperation in 2018 with Ethiopia and Eritrea, which had just agreed to a peace treaty that ended a 20-year-long conflict.

As [Sputnik has reported](#), Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's decision to bridge the gap with what the US considered a pariah state helped solidify Washington's decision to back the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in its struggle against Abiy, who was undermining the group's domineering position in Ethiopian politics. The TPLF had previously ruled Ethiopia for 27 years, serving as the US' primary partner in the region, including invading Somalia in 2006, overthrowing the nascent Islamic Courts Union government and occupying the country for three years.

Ironically, it was just last month that the US ambassador to Somalia, Donald Yamamoto, was [spotted on a secretive Zoom call](#) with the TPLF's Berhane Gebre-Christos. The group, designated a terrorist organization by Abiy's government, has rebelled against the Ethiopian government in a [13-month war](#) that cost thousands of lives.

The US has publicly maintained a neutral position on the conflict, calling on all parties to cease fighting, but in the call, Yamamoto and several other veteran US diplomats joined with European colleagues to urge the TPLF to seize the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa and replace democratically-elected Abiy with a "transition government."

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Biden Says 'We'll See' When Asked If He Would Meet With Putin on Jan 10

By - Morgan Artyukhina

US President Joe Biden seemed ambivalent about the possibility of a January meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin amid a standoff in Ukraine, which Washington claims Moscow is likely to invade with deterrence by NATO despite all claims otherwise from Russia.

Earlier on Tuesday, a spokesperson for the White House National Security Council told [Agence France-Presse](#) that bilateral talks had been scheduled for January 10. Representatives from the NATO alliance are also tentatively set to meet two days later and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) the day after that.

"When we sit down to talk, Russia can put its concerns on the table and we will put our concerns on the table with Russia's activities as well," the spokesperson said.

Asked about the meeting, Biden told reporters "we'll see."

Of course, the Kremlin doesn't seem to think the dates are firm, either: earlier on Tuesday, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei [Ryabkov told reporters](#) the dates "are being considered, but there is no final agreement."

The meeting would primarily concern the Strategic Security Dialogue that Biden and Putin laid out in June, which aims to restore and save Cold War-era nuclear weapons agreements

between the two superpowers, some of which were allowed to lapse by Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump.

However, the talks would also include [security guarantees](#) in Ukraine, where a right-wing nationalist government faces a rebellion by autonomous Russian-speaking cities in the country's east. The country edges ever closer to NATO, an alliance formed during the Cold War to oppose the Soviet Union and its socialist allies but which has persisted into the present day as a de facto anti-Russian alliance.

Russian troops deployed in southern Russia have sparked alarm in Kiev and Brussels, which have claimed the deployments are a prelude to invasion. As justification of their fears, they point to Russian-speaking Crimea, which seceded from Ukraine in 2014 and elected to rejoin Russia in a referendum the western powers refuse to recognize, calling the move a land grab by Putin. Moscow has noted it can send its troops wherever it wants in its own borders, but that they pose no threat to Ukraine. Nonetheless, when Biden and Putin [spoke earlier this month](#) via video call, Biden threatened him with severe sanctions if Russian troops crossed their western border. Putin has said that Russia cannot abide NATO expanding further east after adding several former Soviet allies and former Soviet republics to the alliance, or the stationing of offensive weapons by NATO in Ukraine. NATO said earlier this month it was prepared for de-escalation and confidence-building measures with Russia via the OSCE, but expected Moscow to act in parallel.

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Biden Seems Intent on Shredding What Trust the US Public Had Left in His Pandemic Response

By - Morgan Artyukhina

As the US sees the most dramatic increase in COVID-19 cases thanks to the ultra-transmissible Omicron variant, the Biden administration seems to be doing the opposite of rushing to meet the crisis head-on. Instead, he seems intent on undermining what little trust remains in his pandemic response.

As I write this article, roughly three-quarters of my family has Covid, none of whom have ever had it before, and my city of Washington, DC, leads the nation in skyrocketing Omicron cases. To so many, it seems like everyone they know has caught the virus - a reality that US President [Joe Biden acknowledged](#) last week when he said in a national address that the variant would not send the US "back to March 2020."

For Biden, vaccines, masks, and "resolve" are the key American weapons against COVID-19 today. Although his presidency began in January with a framework of social support programs and he signed a large relief bill, the American Rescue Plan, into law early on, the advent of mass vaccination has shifted his administration's focus, allowing it to steadily shed nearly all responsibility for protecting Americans from the virus.

That has included shredding the [moratoria on evictions](#) and foreclosures, which have resumed despite millions remaining behind on rent as the pandemic continues, and ending the [federal](#)

[unemployment benefit](#), despite millions remaining without work for so long they've dropped out of the workforce and aren't even counted in Department of Labor statistics any longer. COVID-19 tests, now in such high demand, were [trashed over the summer](#) as Washington sent the signal that the pandemic was effectively over. Even after the Delta variant hit, these attitudes only accelerated.

Meanwhile, the wealth of US billionaires has [increased by 62%](#) since the pandemic started, and the stock of the nation's healthcare giants, relied upon to produce the masks, vaccines, and personal protective equipment that will become forever necessary to keep us safe as Covid makes the accepted and inevitable switch from pandemic to endemic, has [risen ever higher](#). In November 2020, as the US entered the deadliest wave of the pandemic thus far, [Biden called for](#) a "robust and immediate federal response" to the "surge" in cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, saying then-President Donald Trump's response had been "woefully lacking." However, 13 months later, [Biden said on Monday](#) that "there is no federal solution. This gets solved at the state level."

The about-face came just days after his famously callous spokesperson, [Jen Psaki, told the 27%](#) of the country that hasn't gotten a single vaccine shot yet, including all children under the age of 5, they would be "looking at a winter of severe illness and death for yourselves, your families, and the hospitals you may soon overwhelm."

This kind of messaging when so many people remain hesitant or opposed to getting vaccinated is the opposite of what is needed. The US' profit-driven private healthcare system has alienated and frustrated so many Americans, is it any wonder millions refuse to "trust the science?"

Biden's administration should be reaching out to the unvaccinated with educational programs to compassionately and patiently address their concerns with facts, not bullying them with callous dismissals that reinforce the very worst conservative stereotypes about liberal elitism.

Abrupt changes to public health regulations that have stood for the past two years have done nothing to engender trust in science, either: for example, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shredded the commonly held logic of a 10-day quarantine period by [halving it on Tuesday](#) and saying that asymptomatic people aren't at risk of transmitting the virus to others.

"The reason is that with the sheer volume of new cases that we are having and that we expect to continue with Omicron, one of the things we want to be careful of is that we don't have so many people out," Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of Biden's coronavirus response team and director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), told CNN on Tuesday.

"We want to get people back to their jobs, particularly those with essential jobs, to keep our society running smoothly," he added, making clear that the driving concern isn't Americans' safety, it's employers angry about workers being out due to contracting a potentially deadly illness.

Also on Tuesday, the Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulator [suddenly pulled](#) an emergency standard protecting healthcare workers, saying it would replace the temporary measure with a permanent one it is working to finalize.

Until then, OSHA has very nicely asked employers, for whom the regulator exists to protect workers against, to continue to abide by the lapsed emergency standard, leaving workers "without protection except for weak General Duty Clause," as OSHA's former deputy assistant secretary, [Jordan Barab, put it](#).

From where I'm standing, it almost looks like Biden is deliberately trying to destroy what remaining trust Americans have in their government and its ability to provide trustworthy guidance in times of crisis and great strife. Instead, it seems like he's now blatantly catering to the desires of the country's richest and most powerful, who have feared since March 2020 that Washington might try to put people ahead of their profits again, which [Trump promised them](#) at the time the US would never again do.

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UPDATE - Some 3,000 Flights Canceled, 11,500 Delayed Worldwide on Tuesday - Tracker

(Updates with latest numbers and data in headline, lede and para 2; edits throughout)

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - Almost 3,000 flights have been canceled and more than 11,500 flights have been delayed worldwide on Tuesday amid the surge of the coronavirus Omicron variant, according to flight tracking website FlightAware.

There were 2,969 flight cancellations and 11,512 flight delays worldwide on Tuesday, with 1,172 of the cancellations and 5,458 of the delays occurring within, into, or out of the United States, according to the FlightAware data.

A day earlier, a total of 12,528 delayed flights and 2,959 canceled flights were reported with airlines and airports in the United States, accounting for nearly half of all delays and cancellations worldwide, Flightradar24 data showed.

Similarly, air travelers in the United States experienced a number of flight disruptions with 2,513 flights canceled on Sunday and 2,850 on Saturday due to a significant number of staff calling in sick.

US media reported that Monday was "horrible" for air travelers amid the Holidays celebrations during the Christmas weekend, when airlines canceled more than 6,000 flights worldwide on Saturday.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the current seven-day moving average of daily new cases reached 122,297 - an increase of 1.5% compared with the previous period.

However, US health authorities have acknowledged that Omicron cases are mild and no deaths attributable to the variant have so far been reported.

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Biden Says 'We'll See' When Asked About Possible Jan. 10 Meeting With Putin - White House

(Updates with new attribution in headline, lede; adds details in paras 4, 5)

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden acknowledged the possibility of holding a meeting with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on January 10, the White House said in a pool report.

"We'll see," Biden said on Tuesday in response to a question about a possible meeting with Putin on January 10.

The meeting would take place days before a reported Russia-NATO meeting on January 12 and a Russia-Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on January 13.

The United States and Russia are expected to hold talks on arms control and the situation in Ukraine on January 10.

Putin said earlier in December following a virtual meeting between him and Biden that they will have to meet again, possibly also in a video format. The two leaders last met in person in Geneva last June.

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Austin Directs US Aircraft Carrier Stay in Mediterranean to Reassure Allies - Pentagon

(Updates with details in paras 1, 2; background in para 4; modifies headline)

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is retaining a nuclear aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean instead of sending it on to the Middle East in order to reassure allies as tensions remain high over Ukraine, a US defense official said in a statement to Sputnik.

"The Secretary of Defense has directed USS Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group (HST CSG) to remain in the EUCOM [European Command] area of operations instead of transiting to the CENTCOM [Central Command] area of operations as originally scheduled," the defense official said on Tuesday. "HST CSG schedule change reflects the need for a persistent presence in Europe, and is necessary to reassure our allies and partners of our commitment to collective defense."

The Truman and its escorts are now operating in the Ionian Sea between Greece and Italy rather than sailing through the Suez Canal into the Red Sea to support CENTCOM, according to media reports.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have been aggravated in the past months amid an alleged Russian troop buildup at the Ukrainian border and claims of preparations for an invasion. Moscow has repeatedly denied the accusations, arguing that Russia has the right to relocate troops within its sovereign territory at its own discretion, while NATO's military activity near Russian borders poses a threat to its security.

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Lockheed Martin Wins \$492M In Deal to Provide More F-35 Jet Support Services - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin Aeronautics has won a more than \$492 million US Navy modification contract to provide logistics support for delivered F-35 jets for the Air Force, Marine Corps and the Navy, the US Defense Department said.

"Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Company [of] Fort Worth, Texas, is awarded a \$492,685,342 ...modification to a previously awarded contract," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

The modification exercises options to provide logistics support to include ground maintenance activities, action request solutions, depot activities, automatic logistics information system operation and maintenance, reliability and maintainability, the release said.

It will also include supply chain management, pilot training, maintainer training and training system sustainment in support of delivered F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter aircraft systems, the release added.

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Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference Likely to Be Delayed - Diplomatic Source

UNITED NATIONS, December 28 (Sputnik) - The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference scheduled to start next week will likely be postponed amid safety concerns related to the increase in coronavirus cases, a diplomatic source at the United Nations told Sputnik.

"The decision to postpone the NPT review conference is expected to be taken," the source told Sputnik on Tuesday evening.

On Monday, the United Nations issued a letter recommending the NPT Review Conference be delayed due to safety concerns stemming from the coronavirus pandemic.

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Biden Says 'We'll See' When Asked About Possible January 10 Meeting With Putin - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden acknowledged the possibility of holding a meeting with Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on January 10, Reuters reported.

"We'll see," Biden said on Tuesday in response to a question about a possible meeting with Putin on January 10.

The meeting would take place days before a reported Russia-NATO meeting on January 12 and a Russia-Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on January 13.

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US Rapid COVID-19 Tests May Not Be Able to Detect Omicron Variant – FDA

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The rapid antigen tests being used in the United States to swiftly detect COVID-19 infections may be less capable of detecting the rapidly spreading Omicron variant, the US Federal Drug Administration said.

"Early data suggests that antigen tests do detect the Omicron variant but may have reduced sensitivity," the FDA said in a statement on Tuesday.

The FDA has granted emergency use authorization for 42 different antigen tests.

But the large number of mutations in virus could diminish the performance of these tests, depending on the sequence of the variant, the design of the test and the prevalence of the variant in the population, the FDA said.

The FDA said its warning was based on preliminary studies it is carrying out in partnership with the US National Institutes of Health's RADx program.

The US regulator warned that clinical laboratory staff and healthcare providers should be aware that false negative results may occur with any molecular test for the detection of SARS-CoV-2, particularly if a mutation occurs in the part of the virus' genome assessed by that test.

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Parents of 14-Year-Old girl Allegedly Killed by Los Angeles Police Mull Lawsuit - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The parents of a 14-year-old girl allegedly killed by a police officer in Los Angeles, California, are considering filing a lawsuit, family attorney Benjamin Crump said.

"Never should this 14-year-old girl ended up as collateral damage at a shopping plaza," Crump said during a press conference on Tuesday.

Crump said the family's legal team will announce details of the next steps they will take in the coming days.

On December 23, Valentina Orellana-Peralta was allegedly killed by an Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officer while shopping in a department store. Police officers were responding to reports of a suspect assaulting people at the store.

The LAPD officer fired several rounds at the suspect but a stray bullet went through the wall of a dressing room where Orellana and her mother were hiding, according to the officer's body camera footage.

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Blinken Discusses Ethiopia Crisis, Somali Elections With Kenya Leader - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken traded views on the Ethiopia crisis and the upcoming elections in Somalia in a phone conversation with President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation.

"Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta today to discuss regional security issues of mutual interest, including the situations in Ethiopia and Somalia," Price said on Tuesday.

In Ethiopia, Blinken and Kenyatta agreed on the urgent need for a cessation of hostilities, unhindered humanitarian access, an end to human rights abuses and violations and a negotiated resolution to the conflict, Price said.

Blinken also "expressed the strong support of the United States for the mediation efforts of President Kenyatta and AU [African Union] Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Olusegun Obasanjo," Price added.

On Somalia, Blinken emphasized the importance of Somalia's national and Federal Member State leaders completing parliamentary and presidential elections immediately that were free from irregularities that would jeopardize the credibility of the outcome, according to the readout.

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US Stocks Drift to Lower Close, Pausing 'Santa Claus Rally'

NEW YORK, December 28 (Sputnik) - US stocks drifted to a broadly lower close on Tuesday, in a pause to the so-called "Santa Claus rally," despite an early record high for the key S&P 500 index.

Wall Street has risen in the past four sessions, with gains all round for the S&P 500 as well as the two other major US equity indexes - the Nasdaq Composite and the Dow Jones Industrial Average. Many had taken to calling it the Santa Claus rally that typically starts at around Christmas and lasts through the year-end.

While Tuesday's broad dip did not necessarily mean the uptrend was broken, it reinforced another year-end occurrence common in stock markets: higher volatility amid lighter volume, as many traders took off for their Christmas and New Year holidays.

The S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks, closed the day down 0.1% at 4,786, after setting an all-time peak of 4,807 right after the start of the trading session. For the year, the S&P 500 is up 27%.

Nasdaq, which groups major technology names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, slid 0.6% to settle at 15,781. Year-to-date, the Nasdaq is up 22%.

The blue-chip Dow, which lists a wide variety of stocks from leisure to banking and agriculture, was the only gainer of the day among the three Wall Street indexes. It rose 0.3% to settle at 36,398. For the year, the Dow is up 19%.

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Blinken, Polish Counterpart Agree on Continual Support for Ukraine Integrity - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken held a telephone call with Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau during which the two diplomats reiterated the United States' and Poland's commitment to supporting Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau," the release said on Tuesday. "The Secretary and Foreign Minister reiterated the United States' firm commitment to Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity in the face of continued Russian aggression, and the Secretary briefed the Foreign Minister on U.S. efforts to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine diplomatically."

The United States continues to strongly support Poland's security amid the migrant crisis on the border with Belarus and sees Transatlantic security as the cornerstone for regional security, the release said.

Blinken also welcomed Polish President Andrzej Duda's veto of the media ownership law, which was highly criticized in the United States as a threat to freedom of expression, the release added.

Relations between Russia and Ukraine deteriorated amid the conflict in Donbas after the US-supported coup d'état in Ukraine in February of 2014. Ukraine has repeatedly accused Russia of interfering in the internal affairs. Moscow has denied the accusations and called them unacceptable, saying it is not a party to the internal Ukrainian conflict and is interested in Kiev overcoming the political and economic crisis.

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Pentagon Tightens Coronavirus Restrictions as Cases Surge in US Capital - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The Defense Department said it is boosting the restrictive measures implemented to deal with the novel coronavirus amid the increase in cases in Washington, DC and the surrounding areas of the US capital.

"[A]s we have seen an increase in coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and positive test results in the National Capitol Region in recent weeks, the Director of Administration and Management is implementing a few additional mitigation measures on the Pentagon Reservation to protect the workforce, their families, our communities, and our support to the no-fail mission of the Department of Defense," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

Defense Department employees are encouraged to work from home at least until the end of the month of January and the only visitors allowed at the Pentagon building will be officials attending mission critical meetings, the release said.

Unofficial visitors will not be allowed in the Pentagon through the end of January, the release also said.

All Defense Department personnel and their family members are recommended to receive a booster dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, the release added.

According to US media, Washington, DC has the highest rate of coronavirus cases in the United States. Last week, the US capital had an estimated 1,192 new cases per day as the more transmissible Omicron variant continues to spread. However, health official had acknowledged that the Omicron cases are mild and there are no reported deaths so far.

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Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference Postponed Due to COVID-19 - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference due to open on January 4 has been postponed until a later date due to COVID-19 concerns, CNN reporter Jennifer Hansler said via Twitter, citing a source familiar with the matter. "The NPT Review Conference, which was scheduled to start next week, has been postponed (again) due to Covid, per a source familiar," Hansler said on Tuesday.

The UN earlier recommended either postponing or holding the NPT Review Conference virtually because of safety concerns, according to a letter sent on Monday by Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti, chef de cabinet to the UN Secretary-General.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) -

RUSSIA-UKRAINE RELATIONS

* Open lines of bilateral dialogue and diplomacy with Russia can play a constructive role in de-escalating the situation around Ukraine, US State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Tuesday.

* The United Kingdom and the European Union are providing Ukraine with coordinated assistance, and any Russian actions toward Ukraine will have serious repercussions, UK Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss said.

* Turkey is closely watching tensions between Russia and Ukraine and supports stability in the region, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said.

SYRIA DEVELOPMENTS

- * Two Israeli fighters F-16 launched a missile attack on facilities in the Syrian port of Latakia last night, the damage to the port infrastructure is negligible, Rear Adm. Oleg Zhuravlev, deputy head of the Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria, said on Tuesday.
- * The number of internally displaced people in Syria has decreased to three million, Deputy Minister of Local Administration Moataz Kattan has told Sputnik.
- * The participation of the United Nations in the process of return of Syrian refugees to their homeland is limited and funding is below 50% of the planned sum, Syrian Deputy Minister of Local Administration Moataz Kattan has told Sputnik.

IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT TALKS

- * The participants in the talks on the restoration of the Iran nuclear deal intend to intensify efforts to develop documents to resolve the issue of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Iranian nuclear program, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- * The US State Department believes it is premature to say whether Iran has returned to nuclear deal talks with a more constructive approach, spokesman Ned Price said.

SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

- * Afghanistan's Ambassador to Tajikistan Muhammad Zahir Agbar told Sputnik that resistance forces against the Taliban (under UN sanctions over terrorist activities) exist not just in the Panjshir province, but also in Kandahar and in the Andarab region of the Baghlan province.
- * Former Vice President of Afghanistan Amrullah Saleh is located in the Panjshir province, and resistance forces against the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) have enough weapons and military equipment there, Agbar said.
- * The Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) are granting Afghan passports to members of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State terror groups (both banned in Russia), Agbar said.
- * The Afghan embassy to Tajikistan has not yet received instructions from the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism), Agbar said.

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Quebec to Allow Essential Workers to Remain on Job After Positive COVID Test - Minister

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Quebec will allow health care staff and other essential workers who test positive for COVID-19 to remain on the job under certain conditions, in an effort to keep key sectors of the economy open, Quebec Health Minister Christian Dubé said Tuesday.

"In consultation with public health, the clinical direction of the ministry and the INSPQ [National Public Health Institute of Quebec] we made the decision that under certain conditions positive staff will be able to continue working according to a list of priority and risk management. It

affects all essential workers not just healthcare workers and we'll provide information in the coming days," Dube said, as broadcast by CTV News.

The Quebec government took this action because of the strain on the healthcare system caused by the troubling rise of the Omicron variant. Cases continue to increase with health officials reporting 15 deaths and 12,833 cases on Tuesday – a single-day high.

Dube said the decision was made as a form of "risk management" as the health care system contends with thousands of COVID-related absences. He said the government has been in talks with unions for several days about the policy change. Officials made the move to because it is the only way to prevent "permanent damage" for those in need of health care, the minister explained. Decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis, he added.

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Judge Sentences California Jewish Center Killer to Life Plus 30 Years - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has sentenced a California man to a sentence of life in prison plus 30 years in added sentences for killing a woman at a Jewish center in 2019 and for trying to burn down a mosque, the Justice Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

"John Earnest, a California man who entered the Chabad of Poway on April 27, 2019, opened fire and killed one woman, injured three others, and attempted to kill 50 others, was sentenced today in the Southern District of California to life followed by 30 years in prison for his crimes," the release said.

Earnest previously pleaded guilty to a 113-count indictment that included 54 counts of violating the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Hate Crimes Prevention Act, 55 counts of violating the Church Arson Prevention Act and four firearms offenses, the release said.

"All people deserve to live and worship peacefully. ... The Department of Justice stands with our Jewish and Muslim community members, we reject hate in all forms, and we are committed to prosecuting bias-motivated violence to the fullest extent," US Attorney General Merrick Garland said in the release.

According to court documents, on the morning of April 27, 2019, Earnest drove to the Chabad of Poway synagogue and entered the building armed with a Smith and Wesson M&P 15 assault rifle that was fully loaded with a ten-round magazine. He opened fire, killing one person and injuring three, the release added.

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US Extends Measure to Let Citizens Enter Country on Expired Passports - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has extended its temporary measure to allow US citizens to return to the country on expired passports until the end of March, the US State Department announced on Tuesday.

"US citizens currently abroad whose passports expired on or after January 1, 2020, may be able to use their expired US passport for return travel to the United States until March 31, 2022," the State Department said in a media note.

Recently expired US passports cannot be used to travel from the United States to an international destination or to travel to a foreign country for any length of stay longer than an airport connection on the way to the United States or to a US territory, the note added.

As of December 6, all air travelers, regardless of vaccination status, must show proof of a negative COVID-19 test result, taken no more than 24 hours before their flights' departure to the United States, the State Department noted.

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US Says 'Too Soon to Tell' If Iran Returned to JCPOA Talks With More Constructive Approach

(Adds more quotes from Price in paras 3-4, background in paras 5-6)

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The US State Department believes it is premature to say whether Iran has returned to nuclear deal talks with a more constructive approach, spokesman Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"it's really too soon to tell whether Iran has returned with a more constructive approach to the new round of JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] talks," Price told journalists.

Price added that there has been some progress in identifying the complex issues left to be negotiated in terms of how Iran returns to full compliance with its nuclear commitments under the JCPOA.

"But the fundamental situation has, as of today, not changed," he added.

The eighth round of talks to bring Iran back to the nuclear deal and lift US sanctions began in Vienna on December 27.

In 2018, the United States withdrew from the JCPOA, which had been signed between Iran, the P5+1 and the European Union in 2015. Thereafter, the US enacted hardline policies against Iran, prompting the latter to largely abandon its obligations under the deal.

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New York City Receives \$20.5M In Grant to Reduce Gun Violence Among Youth – US Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - New York City will receive more than \$20.5 million in federal commitments for efforts to reduce gun violence among young people, the US Treasury Department said Tuesday.

"The U.S. Department of the Treasury announced that it has awarded the New York City Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (NYC-MOCJ) over \$20.5 million in federal commitments to support its efforts to reduce gun violence among youth," the statement read.

The awards are parts of the Treasury's Social Impact Partnerships to Pay for Results Act (SIPRA) program. It includes a project grant of \$17.6 million with a \$2.6 million grant to pay for an independent evaluation of the program's effectiveness.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio thanked the Treasury Department and the Biden administration for their recognition of his city's effort to devise and implement "the most effective solutions to gun violence (which) come from the grassroots." It is clear that these types of investments save lives, the mayor added.

The program uses intervention to target young people between the ages of 16 and 24 years old who are most likely to become involved in violence, particularly gun violence. Community-based outreach workers and violence interrupters will intervene and work directly with the young people they have identified in an effort to change their attitudes and behavior by encouraging them to move away from violence.

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US Calls for Immediate Release of Paul Whelan on Third Anniversary of Arrest in Russia

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of ex-marine Paul Whelan, who was arrested in Russia three years ago on espionage charges and later sentenced to 16 years in prison, the State Department said on Tuesday.

"Three years ago today, Paul Whelan was detained by Russian authorities. He traveled to Russia as a tourist and was imprisoned and sentenced on false charges," spokesman Ned Price said. "Secretary Blinken has been very clear about the need for Russia to release U.S. citizens Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed unconditionally and immediately so they can be home with their families. Their release remains a vital priority for the United States."

Paul Whelan, who holds American, British, Canadian and Irish citizenship, is serving his sentence in Russia's Mordovia region after a Moscow court sentenced him to 16 years in prison in June 2020 on charges of espionage. He denies the charges, but did not challenge the verdict in hopes of being part of a prisoner exchange between the United States and Russia.

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Dialogue With Russia Can Be Constructive for De-Escalation Around Ukraine – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - Open lines of bilateral dialogue and diplomacy with Russia can play a constructive role in de-escalating the situation around Ukraine, US State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"We believe that open lines of dialogue, open lines of diplomacy have the potential to be constructive as we seek to de-escalate the potential for conflict in and around Ukraine," Price said during a press briefing.

The US and Russia will hold talks on arms control and Ukraine on January 10. The negotiations will be followed by a NATO-Russia Council meeting on January 12.

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US Says 'Too Soon to Tell' If Iran Returned to JCPOA Talks With More Constructive Approach

MOSCOW, December 28 (Sputnik) - The US State Department believes it is premature to say whether Iran has returned to nuclear deal talks with a more constructive approach, spokesman Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"It's really too soon to tell whether Iran has returned with a more constructive approach to the new round of JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] talks," Price told journalists.

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US Nuclear Aircraft Carrier Truman Stays in Mediterranean to Reassure Allies - Austin

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is retaining a nuclear aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean instead of sending it on to the Middle East in order to reassure allies as tensions remain high over Ukraine, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said, according to a US Navy report on Tuesday.

The USS Harry S Truman and its battle group will remain in the Mediterranean Sea on orders from Austin, the semi-official US Naval Institute (USNI) News reported.

The Truman and its escorts are now operating in the Ionian Sea between Greece and Italy rather than sailing through the Suez Canal into the Red Sea to support US Central Command (CENTCOM), the report said, citing defense sources.

Austin personally approved the change in plans for the carrier group in order to signal to European allies the continuing US commitment to regional security, the report added.

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COVID-19 Detected on 89 Cruise Ships in US Waters, Sparking CDC Investigations

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - COVID-19 cases have been found on 89 cruise ships that operate in US waters, prompting health authorities with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to start investigations into many of the outbreaks, according to CDC data released on Tuesday.

CDC data on the COVID-19 status of cruise ships operating or planning to operate in US waters indicate a total of 89 ships with cases of the disease, 86 of which meet the threshold for CDC investigation.

Cruise ships experiencing COVID-19 outbreaks include those operated by Carnival, Royal Caribbean Cruises and Disney Cruise Line.

While cruising will always pose some risk of COVID-19 transmission, CDC is committed to working with cruise ship operators to ensure that cruise ship passenger operations are conducted in a way that reduces the risk of COVID-19 transmission among crew members, passengers, and port personnel, the CDC said.

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Omicron Caused 58.6% of COVID-19 Infections in US Last Week - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus Omicron variant has accounted for 58.6% of all new infections in the United States in the week ending on December 25, new data by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showed on Tuesday.

CDC has also revised its past estimates for the week ending on December 18, when the agency announced that Omicron accounted for 73.2% of all new infections. The revised proportions show that the Delta variant caused 77% infections and Omicron 22.5% infections during that week.

The latest seven-day average of cases has increased to nearly 206,000 per day amid the growing prevalence of the Omicron variant, according to the CDC data.

Omicron was first detected in South Africa in November. South African health authorities, but also health experts from other countries, have said the Omicron variant is much more transmissible, but produces mild cases.

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Russia Considers Mali Gov't. as Legitimate, Cooperation as Positive - Deputy Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 29 (Sputnik) - Russia considers the current government in Mali to be legitimate and views cooperation with it as positive, Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Tuesday.

"We have long traditions of cooperation and friendship with Malian government - with previous ones and with the current one. For us, this is a legitimate government," Polyanskiy said. "There are no doubts about this, and we cooperate with this [government] and we don't see any reasons why we should not view cooperation with this government as something positive." Polyanskiy went on to say that Russia seeks to help the Malian people and is determined to do so.

When asked to further comment on the existing cooperation between the two countries, Polyanskiy noted that "cooperation means cooperation in training."

"We have always had military cooperation, government-to-government, on the training of Malian army," he said. "But it's not limited to military issues only. It's also in the field of education, of healthcare, of everything that makes a state a state. We also want Mali to be a strong country." Polyanskiy pointed out that Russia is concerned that the Malian government has a symbolic control over the north of the country and now in the middle of the country as well."

"We don't think it's normal. And we think that it is in the interest of the whole international community to help Malian government to recuperate control over its territory, and to help it to fight terrorism because Sahel is a very dangerous region," he said.

When asked about the presence of the Wagner Group, Polyanskiy said, "It's difficult for me to imagine what can be invented in the minds of our Western colleagues or American colleagues."

"I can't comment on everything every crazy idea that they have in their minds and every allegation that they invent, because they don't even care to refute any allegations that didn't come true," he said. "They just make new allegations and everything fits in the picture of malign Russia promoting its malign interest in African continent."

The deputy envoy said any alleged involvement of the Wagner Group has nothing to do with any Russian officials nor is supported by the state.

"If it's on the market, so then it's up to any country to choose whether they cooperate or not cooperate with this company. And Mali is not an exemption in this kind. I don't see any reasons why Malian government can't take their sovereign decision to engage with this military company or with another military company of these kinds from other country," he said.

Earlier in December, the French Defense Ministry said Paris pulled out its troops from the city of Timbuktu in northern Mali, completing an eight-years military presence within the scope of Operation Barkhane, launched by France in 2014. The anti-terrorist operation is also supported by the G5 Sahel group, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger and Mauritania.

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Virginia Conservators Open Second Time Capsule Found Beneath Removed Robert E. Lee Statue

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - Virginia conservators on Tuesday opened a second time capsule found embedded in the pedestal underneath a now-removed statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Richmond.

Conservators with the Virginia Historic Resources Department, local universities and museums cut open the time capsule, which weighed 36 pounds, and found items including what appear to be buttons, books, a Bible, Confederate money, coins, a printed image of Abraham Lincoln from a magazine, and a shell fragment from the Battle of Fredericksburg.

The items inside appear to have experienced water damage and other forms of wear and tear, but are in better condition than anticipated, the conservators said. It's "not the smelliest time capsule," one of the conservators jokingly noted.

Conservators last week opened a different time capsule embedded in the statue's pedestal, which contained a silver coin, books and an envelope with papers.

The bronze statue of Robert E. Lee, from underneath which working crews removed the time capsules, was taken down in September due to its association with the Confederacy amid protest for racial justice.

Virginia Governor Ralph Northam - who ordered the statue's pedestal removal in a reversal of previous plans to repurpose it and attended the previous time capsule's opening - on Monday tweeted X-rays of the inside of the second time capsule taken prior to its opening.

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US Home Prices up 19% in Year to October - S&P Dow Jones Indices

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - US home prices rose just over 19% in the year to October despite moving a notch lower from September, the S&P Dow Jones Indices (S&P DJI) said on Tuesday as it released its latest housing price index.

"In October 2021, US home prices moved substantially higher, but at a decelerating rate," S&P DJI Managing Director Craig Lazzara in a news release. "The National Composite Index rose 19.1% from year-ago levels, and the 10- and 20-City Composites gained 17.1% and 18.4%, respectively. In all three cases, October's gains were below September's, and September's gains were below August's."

October's 19.1% gain in the National Composite was the fourth-highest reading in 34 years of S&P DJI data, Lazzara added.

The selling price for a new residence in the United States hit record highs above \$416,000 in November, according to Commerce Department data that showed no let up in the rise of home prices as inflation in the world's largest economy grew at its fastest pace in four decades.

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Biden Mulls Progressive Democrats' Choice for Fed Vice Chair of Supervision - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is considering former Federal Reserve Governor Sarah Bloom Raskin as the US central bank's Vice Chairwoman of

Supervision in what would be an influential role overseeing the US banking system, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday.

Raskin's nomination could appease progressive Democrats, some of whom have bristled at Biden's decision in November to hand a second four-year term to Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell - a Republican picked by former President Donald Trump.

Biden had voiced full confidence in Powell's ability to keep US growth on track despite inflation expanding at its fastest pace in almost 40 years in an economy rebounding from effects of the coronavirus pandemic measures.

Elizabeth Warren, a Democrat senator who contested the US presidency herself before withdrawing in a race won by Biden, has been a fierce critic of Powell for what she deemed was a lack of action against big banks and Wall Street actors that won at the expense of the poor.

Warren has signaled that she would support Raskin's nomination. An attorney, Raskin previously served in the Obama administration as deputy secretary at the Treasury Department from 2014 to 2017 and as a Federal Reserve governor from 2010 to 2014.

According to the report, Biden is also considering two economists for other Federal Reserve Executive Board seats that will soon be vacant. They are Lisa Cook, a professor of economics and international relations at Michigan State University; and Philip Jefferson, a professor and administrator at Davidson College in North Carolina.

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Biden Lifts Omicron-Related Travel Ban on Southern African Nations - White House

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden revoked on Tuesday the travel ban on eight southern African nations first implemented after the initial emergence of the Omicron coronavirus variant from the region.

"Having learned more about the Omicron variant in the past several weeks, the CDC now recommends lifting the travel restrictions imposed in Proclamation 10315 ... In light of these changed circumstances, and based on the recommendation of the CDC, I have determined that it is in the interests of the United States to revoke Proclamation 10315. The travel restrictions imposed by that proclamation are no longer necessary to protect the public health," Biden said in a proclamation published by the White House.

The proclamation revoking the travel ban will go into effect at 12:01 a.m. eastern standard time on December 31. The secretaries of state, transportation and homeland security shall review any policies developed pursuant to the travel ban and consider their revision or revocation, according to the proclamation.

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New York City Schools to Test Each Student for Coronavirus Amid Surge in Cases - Mayor

NEW YORK, December 28 (Sputnik) - The New York City authorities are distributing some 2 million coronavirus test kits mostly to schools in a bid to keep in class what they term are "asymptomatic children" amid an increase in pediatric hospitalizations, Mayor Bill de Blasio said on Tuesday.

"Your children are safer in school and the numbers speak for themselves," de Blasio told a live streamed event where he appeared with Mayor-Elect Eric Adams and New York Governor Kathy Hochul as they attempted to convince parents to keep their children in school so long as they are not sick.

New York City has recently seen a nearly five-fold increase in pediatric hospitalizations as the coronavirus Omicron variant infects more children, according to New York State health officials. Under the new plan, the city's ramped-up testing program will allow children asymptomatic to COVID-19 to remain in class and only keep at home those who test positive for the coronavirus. Previously, entire classrooms of students were quarantined to study from home once one or more were found to have contracted the virus. Now, those same students will receive a rapid at-home test and return to class if they test negative. For additional protection, a second test will be conducted within seven days of the first.

"We cannot go back to isolation, remote learning and keeping our children from everything," City University of New York Health and Wellness Director Fabian Wander, who joined de Blasio on the call, said. "The impact isolation has on young people's emotional wellness is something we've only just started to grapple with. This isn't healthy."

New York City's public school system is the largest of its kind in the United States with some 1.1 million students.

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Belarus Should Not Be Denied UN Security Council Membership - Russian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 28 (Sputnik) - No reasons exist to deny Belarus the right to become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in the 2024-2025 period, Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Tuesday.

"[T]here are absolutely no reasons to deny [Belarus] its right to bid for the non-permanent membership of the Security Council. Though, we'll never disclose our preferences on whom Russia will vote and whom will we support," Polyanskiy said during a press briefing.

The Russian diplomat said Western countries are trying to prevent Belarus from getting a seat on the UN Security Council and have pushed Slovenia to bid to become a non-permanent member during the same period as Belarus.

Polyanskiy also said he hopes the Slovenian bid will fail since it runs against the rules and norms of civilized behavior in the United Nations.

Belarus has been an agreed candidate to the UN Security Council from the Eastern European group of countries for the period of 2024-2025 since 2007 while Slovenia's bid was for a later period.

On December 9, Slovenia announced its bid for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council that was immediately endorsed by the United States.

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US Calls for Arms Embargo on Myanmar After Massacre of 35 Adults, Children – Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) – The United States calls for an international arms embargo on Myanmar following a massacre of 35 people, including several children, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"The targeting of innocent people and humanitarian actors is unacceptable, and the military's widespread atrocities against the people of Burma underscore the urgency of holding its members accountable," Blinken said in a statement. "The international community must do more to advance this goal and prevent the recurrence of atrocities in Burma, including by ending the sale of arms and dual-use technology to the military."

The United States condemns the attacks committed on December 24 by the Myanmar armed forces in Kayah state that killed at least 35 people, including women and children and two staff members of the international aid organization Save the Children, the diplomat said.

"Since the February 1 coup, the United States has imposed targeted sanctions against the Burmese military, its leaders, and their financial interests, disrupting their access to the international financial system. We will continue to work with our partners and allies to promote accountability," he added.

The US government was "alarmed" by the brutality exhibited by Myanmar's military, who seized power in a coup on February 1, Blinken stated.

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US Health Agency Recommends Americans Avoid Sweden, Malta Due to COVID-19 Risk - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said on Tuesday that it has elevated Moldova, Malta and Sweden to its highest Level 4 category on the list of countries it recommends travelers not to visit due to COVID-19 concerns.

"Avoid travel to these destinations. If you must travel to these destinations, make sure you are fully vaccinated before travel," the CDC said.

The US health agency also said "even" fully vaccinated travelers may be at risk for getting and spreading coronavirus variants.

The CDC also raised its travel warning for Argentina to Level 3, signifying high COVID-19 risk.

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Russia Wants Serious Security Guarantees From Talks With US, NATO - Deputy UN Envoy

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - Russia will be looking for serious guarantees at security talks with the United States and NATO in January, Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Tuesday.

"As for what we want ... this is a serious proposal and we want serious guarantees from the United States first and foremost, and from NATO," Polyanskiy said. "We are quite constructive but I don't think our colleagues will get away with some blah blah blah thing, as Greta puts it, so we really want something serious this time. It's not an ultimatum... it's a constructive proposal, but a proposal that works for everybody and that is in the interests of everybody."

The US and Russia will hold talks on arms control and Ukraine on January 10. Negotiations on security guarantees with NATO are expected to take place on January 12 in Geneva, Switzerland.

Russia will firmly defend its national interests at the upcoming talks, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Tuesday, vowing not to make any unilateral concessions without taking the balance of interests into account.

Shortly after the announcement of the talks, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko told Sputnik that the main issue to be raised at the talks would be security proposals for NATO laid out by Russia, including non-expansion of the alliance in Eastern Europe. Relations between NATO and Russia have deteriorated over the West's accusations that Moscow is planning to invade Ukraine. Moscow has repeatedly denied the allegations, saying that troop movements are purely defensive given NATO's increased military activity near Russian borders, and stressed that it has the right to move troops within its own territory at its discretion.

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UN Suggests Postponing January NPT Review Conference or Holding It Virtually

WASHINGTON, December 29 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has recommended either postponing or holding virtually the next Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference.

"In light of the foregoing, I wish to advise you that the Secretariat will not be able to service an in-person meeting of the Tenth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in January 2022," Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti, the chef de cabinet to the UN secretary-general, said in a letter dated December 27.

"Unfortunately, in light of the current situation, our considered view is that it will be safer for delegates and staff alike if the Review Conference is either held in a fully virtual format or if

consideration is given to its postponement if in-person participation is deemed preferable," she added.

President-designate of the 2020 NPT review conference, Gustavo Zlauvinen, said in a letter in July that the tenth session was rescheduled and will be held in January 2022 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The conference is the main event in the field of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament and takes place every five years.

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Crews Conclude Cleanup of California Oil Spill, Shoreline Returns to Normal - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - Cleanup crews have concluded their efforts after restoring segments of the southern California shoreline impacted by an oil pipeline leak in October of this year to their original condition, the interagency Unified Command team said in an updated statement.

"After sustained cleanup operations for the Southern California oil spill, affected shoreline segments have been returned to their original condition. The Unified Command, led by the U. S. Coast Guard, California Department of Fish and Wildlife Office of Spill Prevention and Response (CDFW-OSPR), the County of Orange, the County of San Diego, and the Responsible Party, thoroughly assessed all segments to reach this milestone in the incident response," the statement said.

Approximately 25,000 gallons of crude oil were discharged less than five miles west of southern California's Huntington Beach by a leaky oil pipeline owned and operated by the companies Amplify Energy Corporation, Beta Operating Company and San Pedro Bay Pipeline Company. The three companies were charged earlier in December with one misdemeanor count of negligent oil discharge. The indictment alleges that they acted negligent in at least six different ways, including failing to properly respond to eight separate leak alarms over the span of more than 13 hours and improperly restarting the pipeline that had been shut down following the leak alarms.

The oil spill response will now enter a transition period, during which Unified Command will monitor tar ball and oiling incidents, the statement said.

Once Unified Command determines that the transition period should end, response efforts will officially conclude, the statement added.

The pipeline remains shut down, and officials have approved Amplify Energy's plan to repair and flush the pipeline, according to the statement.

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UN Not Involved in Russia-NATO Discussions on Alliance Non-Expansion East - Deputy Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 28 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is not involved in the ongoing discussions between NATO and Russia on the proposed guarantees for the alliance's non-expansion, but all UN member states would welcome an agreement between Washington and Moscow, Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the world body Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Tuesday.

"[T]he United Nations is not involved at all at this point at these discussions. It is a question of, first and foremost, bilateral [relations] between Russia and the United States. I assume that all UN member states would welcome such an agreement and such a move will make our world a much safer place," Polyanskiy said.

The United States and Russia will hold talks on arms control and on the situation in Ukraine on January 10. The negotiations on security guarantees with NATO are expected to take place on January 12 in Geneva, Switzerland.

Last week, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced an initiative to hold talks with Russia on January 12. Shortly after the announcement, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko told Sputnik that the main issue to be raised at the talks would be security proposals for NATO laid out by Russia, including a non-expansion of the alliance in Eastern Europe.

Relations between NATO and Russia have deteriorated over the West's accusations that Moscow is planning to invade Ukraine. Russia has repeatedly denied the allegations, saying that troop movements are purely defensive given NATO's increased military activity near Russia's borders, and emphasized that it reserves the right to move forces within its own sovereign territory.

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UNICEF Condemns Massacre of 35 Adults, Children in Myanmar - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, December 28 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has condemned the murder and burning of 35 people, including four children, and two Save the Children officials in Eastern Myanmar, UNICEF announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"UNICEF is shocked and saddened by the reported killing and burning of at least 35 people, including four children and two staff members of the humanitarian organization Save the Children, in Kayah State in Eastern Myanmar, on 24 December," the release said.

Credible reports suggest that four children were killed in the attack, including two 17-year-old boys, a teenage girl and a child of approximately five to six years of age, UNICEF said.

"UNICEF strongly condemns this attack on civilians, children and humanitarian workers. The protection of civilians, and particularly children and humanitarian workers, must be treated as a priority during times of conflict, in accordance with international humanitarian law," Regional Director for East Asia and the Pacific Debora Comini said.

The two Save the Children staff members, whose deaths were confirmed today, were killed while returning to the organization's Loikaw office after they initially responded to a humanitarian needs call in a nearby community, the release said.

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Some 2,500 Flights Canceled, 5,200 Delayed Worldwide on Tuesday - Tracker

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - Almost 2,500 flights have been canceled and nearly 5,200 flights have been delayed worldwide on Tuesday as a result of health officials' and airlines' concerns about the coronavirus Omicron variant, according to the tracking website FlightAware.

A day earlier, a total of 12,528 delayed flights and 2,959 canceled flights were reported with airlines and airports in the United States, accounting for nearly a half of all the delays and cancellations worldwide, Flightradar24 data showed.

Similarly, air travelers in the United States saw a rash of flight disruptions with 2,513 flights canceled on Sunday and 2,850 on Saturday as a significant number of staff called in sick. US media reported that Monday was "horrible" for air travelers amid the Holidays celebrations during the Christmas weekend, when airlines canceled more than 6,000 flights worldwide on Saturday.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the current seven-day moving average of daily new cases reached 122,297 - an increase of 1.5% compared with the previous period.

However the health authorities in the United States and throughout the world have acknowledged that the Omicron variant cases are mild and no deaths have so far been reported.

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US Decries Russian Supreme Court's Decision to Close NGO Memorial International

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - The United States denounces the Russian Supreme Court's decision to grant the request of the Prosecutor General's Office to shut down Memorial International (recognized as a foreign agent in Russia), a human rights organization studying political crimes and repression in the Soviet Union, Ambassador in Moscow John Sullivan said on Tuesday.

"AMB Sullivan: The Russian Supreme Court's decision today to shut down International Memorial – one of Russia's oldest & most prominent human rights organizations – is a blatant and tragic attempt to suppress freedom of expression and erase history," the US embassy wrote on Twitter.

The request to close Memorial International was submitted to the Supreme Court last month on charges of violating Russia's foreign agents law.

On Wednesday, a Moscow court will hold a hearing concerning a similar request from Russian prosecutors against Memorial Human Rights Center, an affiliate group charged with justifying terrorism in its publications, along with allegedly violating the "foreign agents" law by repeatedly failing to mark its publications with a relevant warning.

According to prosecutors, International Memorial distorts the memory of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 and "creates a false image of the USSR as a terrorist state."

The NGO's defense team, for its part, requested that they not be shut down outright, noting that the group had already paid relevant fines and adapted its activities to the law on "foreign agents" by labeling its publications with relevant warnings.

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UK Consul Visits Paul Whelan in Russian Prison – Family

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) – A British diplomat has visited UK and US citizen Paul Whelan in a Russian prison where he is serving a 16-year jail term for espionage, his family said on Tuesday.

"Consul Sarah Pilbeam from the UK Embassy visited him last week [12/21] to provide consular support and boost his morale," the family said in a statement on the third anniversary of his arrest in Russia.

The family expressed the hope that Paul will be released in 2022.

"The Biden Administration has raised Paul's wrongful detention in their many contacts with Russian counterparts, including by President [Joe] Biden himself. We hope that 2022 is the year that Paul's freedom is restored to him," the statement read. "We look forward to his return and hope that it happens before a fourth anniversary comes around."

Paul Whelan, who holds American, British, Canadian and Irish citizenship, is serving his sentence in Russia's Mordovia region after a Moscow court sentenced him to 16 years in prison in June 2020 on charges of espionage. He denies the charges but did not challenge the verdict in hope of being part of a potential prisoner exchange between the United States and Russia.

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Five Dead in Shooting Spree in Colorado - Police

WASHINGTON, December 28 (Sputnik) - Five people, including a gunman, were killed in a shooting spree across the Denver metro area and Lakewood in the US state of Colorado, police said on Tuesday.

"There are four significant locations where gunfire took place in the city and county of Denver," Denver Police Chief Paul Pazen said at a news conference.

The shootings began after 5 p.m. on Monday (midnight GMT), leaving two women dead and a man injured, according to Pazen. A man was then killed at a second location. A gun was fired at a third location, but no injuries were reported.

Denver police chased a vehicle being driven by the suspect, Pazen continued. While the suspect was shooting at police, one individual was killed.

More gunfire was exchanged between the officers and the suspect, who was later killed, police said, adding that there is no threat to the community.